

ABROAD AT HOME

Meese and Secrecy

By Anthony Lewis

Edwin Meese and his colleagues on the White House staff have identified one obstacle to Mr. Meese's early confirmation as Attorney General, and they hope to deal with it by compromise. That is President Reagan's order of last March 11 creating a lifetime censorship system for officials who see highly sensitive information.

The Reagan order was widely criticized in Congress as a radical and unjustified departure from established law. Last October the Republican-controlled Senate voted, 56 to 34, to suspend enforcement of the order until April 15 for further study. The House agreed, and the suspension is now in effect.

With the censorship plan in that suspended state, Mr. Meese could expect intensive questioning about it at his confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Moreover, the committee's second-ranking Republican, Charles McC. Mathias of Maryland, sponsored the amendment blocking enforcement along with Senator Thomas Eagleton, Democrat of Missouri.

What the White House obviously wants to avoid is a situation in which Mr. Meese becomes hostage to a fight over the censorship plan. Such a struggle would delay a final vote on his nomination in the Judiciary Committee, which tends to proceed with deliberate speed anyway. And delay would allow critics of the Meese appointment to work up opposition.

To avoid delay and risk to Mr. Meese, Mr. Reagan's staff has been talking about ways of pulling back on the March 11 order and thus muting Congressional criticism of it. Possible ideas for compromise will be taken to Capitol Hill for discussion soon, very likely this week.

The March 11 order, formally entitled "National Security Decision Directive 84," covers all officials and Federal contract employees who see what is known as Sensitive Compartmented Information. That is 127,500 persons now, and the number would quickly grow as they leave and are replaced.

Everyone covered would come under a censorship system for the rest of his life, even after leaving Government work. He would have to submit for clearance anything he wanted to write — books, newspaper articles, speeches — if it might arguably reflect classified or even unclassified information about intelligence matters.

The sweep of the order is so broad that former officials would effec-

tively have to clear anything on national security subjects. A Cyrus Vance or Alexander Haig would not be able to write for a newspaper Op Ed page about Lebanon or Grenada without submitting the proposed piece to censors — censors who might be directed by an administration of the other political party.

Compromise on that drastic censorship system might seem impossible, but in fact the White House staff has little personal commitment to it. The order was drafted by a conservative ideologue at the Justice Department, Richard K. Willard, apparently at the direction of William Clark, then President Reagan's national security adviser. It never went through the regular White House clearance process.

Mr. Willard has already been up to Capitol Hill floating one idea for a substitute plan — but it is about as savage as the original. It would create a system of heavy financial penalties for leaks, to be imposed by administrative officials who could also subpoena reporters to find out who leaked.

Another possibility the Reagan people have considered is a criminal statute against leaks, but its chances would truly be just as dim. Congress is well aware that administrations often denounce, as leaks, information that Congress and the public must have to do their job of checking Government policy.

Still another idea being discussed would be to cut off the censorship obligation at some point — say 12 years after a person left Government — instead of having it run for life. But that seems unlikely to strike Congressional critics as persuasively logical. Finally the White House might offer to put the whole issue aside for a year, until after the election.

The key figure in any negotiations will be Senator Mathias. His temperament is for accommodation. But in this instance it is hard to see why he would accept any compromise that left intact the essence of the radical censorship plan, or that invited its reimposition by a re-elected President Reagan next year.

Senator Mathias knows that White House support for the March 11 order was waning long before the Meese nomination. Critics of the order had really won the argument that there was no showing of need for such a drastic change in the American tradition. If Mr. Meese wants to avoid entanglement with the censorship plan, the simple solution is for the President to drop it.

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